DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 747 CS 204 779

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TITLE Making Grading Work.
PUB DATE Feb 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (14th, Des Moines, Iowa, February 15-17, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Grading; Higher Education; Informal Assessment; *Student Evaluation; Student Teacher Relationship; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

Two teachers have developed a procedure for grading student compositions that seems fairer to both them and their students. The students are given a choice of which papers they wish to submit for grading, and when they do submit work, the papers are identified by a number only (chosen by the student and indexed in a class card file). Each teacher grades each anonymous paper holistically, and the average of the two grades is recorded (when grades differ by more than one full letter grade, the teachers discuss their reasons for the grade and reach a compromise grade). After the grades are assigned, the papers are sorted by class (identified now by student name), and the teachers provide comments to their own students' compositions. The teachers find that making grading a separate anonymous action enables them to focus on each student's particular writing needs without having to hesitate or agonize about awarding a grade. The procedure also eliminates "personalities" as a factor in grading, since teachers don't know whose paper they are grading and are not solely responsible for the grades. Students, on the whole, have reacted positively to this system, noting its extreme fairness and the increased freedom it gives them. The teachers consider the best indication of the success of this procedure to be the fact that they will continue to use it. (RL)

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Making Grading Work

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Nearly every composition teacher we know is dissatisfied with grading, and nearly every student we have taught shares this feeling to some degree. We feel the roots of this dissatisfaction lie in the distorting pressures grades exert on students and teachers alike. Grades, and the rewards that good ones offer (jobs, admission to graduate and professional school), pressure students to write what they think teachers want to hear and even to try "buttering up" the teacher in non-academic ways. In the subtle games that follow any attempt to psych out the teacher, the student's own need to find something to say and the best way to say it inevitably gets lost. If the students fail to play the game successfully, they may even come to feel that teachers are idiosyncratic or perhaps even prejudiced. By the same token, grades pressure teachers by forcing them to combine the roles of fair-minded judge and sympathetic reader--a mixture difficult to maintain and even more difficult for students to believe. Both these pressures work to destroy the basic trust and openmindedness necessary to the ideal relationship between a writer and an audience, a relationship vital to teaching composition.

But it will not do simply to eliminate grades entirely; almost all colleges and universities demand grades of some sort. Of course a teacher can circumvent the requirement by giving all A's, but this practice is usually frowned upon by ad-

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ministrators and, with the passing of the liberal sixties, has fallen into disrepute with the students as well. The university and the outside world that indirectly controls it need some way to sort out the masses of students they process, and grades provide a temptingly facile means of sorting. This entrenchment of grades may not be entirely a bad thing. Most teachers use grades to motivate students, and, human nature being what it is, this function of grading is probably necessary. In spite of the potentially liberating effect of writing and the joy we experience in saying something well, most of us need some sort of push to get us over the ever-present reluctance to settle down and write.

So it seems likely that some form of grades as we know them will always be with us. The challange for us as teachers is to use grading as a means of motivating students, while preventing grades from exercising their destructive influence on the writer-reader relationship. We need to assure our students that their grades are not the result of an opinionated and arbitrary reading, but rather of a careful and informed judgment that seeks consistency while shunning prescriptive dicta.

These problems led us to create a grading situation in which the teacher could assume the role of ally rather than judge. In order to separate our role as teacher from our role as evaluator, we devised a procedure by which we each graded the papers for both of our classes anonymously, simply issuing a first impression, holistic grade after one reading. The two

grades were then averaged, providing they did not differ by more than one full letter grade, and this average became the only grade the students saw.[1]

Before beginning, we knew of and were comforted by the fact that experienced teachers can achieve a high level of consistency in their evaluation of student writing, even using holistic, first-impression grading (Cooper and Odell, Evaluating Writing, [NCTE, 1977], p. 12). We were further fortified by the notion that we would be teaching the same syllabus (jointly arrived at), observing one another's classes periodically, and meeting at least weekly to analyze the progress of the semester. But the primary purpose was not to demonstrate our mutual reliability as graders, but rather to explore the implications for teaching writing of having each paper read twice, as anonymously as possible, and having our students fully aware of this fact.

We informed the students on the first day of the semester that we would be allowing them a choice of which papers they wished to submit to be graded, and further, that when they turned in a paper for grading, it was to be identified by a number only. They were themselves the generators of the numbers, and our only access to the numbers was through a card file which linked the numbers on the back of the cards to the names on the front. We informed them that their papers would be graded twice, and that their grade was to be the average of the two. They were, of course, baffled, but being mostly freshmen, they accepted the conditions as immutable.

Our work began in earnest when we received a batch of numbered papers. One of us would take both sets of papers home, shuffle them as so many cards, and then read through them, assigning a grade to each, but recording the grade and the student's number on a separate list. The following day we transferred the batch of papers from one to the other, and the same reading, grading, and recording took place again. We then met on the third day and compared lists of numbers and grades, looking up the students' names in the card file and sorting out the papers according to class at the same time. If the grades differed by no more than one full letter grade, we simply averaged the two to arrive at a grade for the paper. If the difference was larger, we discussed the reasons for our differing opinions until we arrived at an acceptable compromise. On only one occasion did we have to submit a paper, still totally unmarked by us in any way, to a third reader whose grade was substituted for the most divergent of our grades.

After having assigned grades to all the papers, each of us took his own students' work home and made taped comments for the students, without having to hesitate, or in some cases agonize, over awarding a grade. We treated the grades as "given"; thus our comments could be focused on rhetorical strategies, organizational difficulties, persistent grammatical problems, or whatever a particular student and his or her writing seemed to need.

If the foregoing description of our goals and our procedures seems smooth and trouble-free, then a few words of caution may be in order. There are certain unavoidable logistical problems in administering the system. The smallest problem, and the easiest to live with, is administering the procedure itself. A certain investment of time is required to read twice as many papers as usual. We estimate that three hours is probably enough time to read and holistically evaluate fifty papers; however, only an additional one and a half hours will actually be spent reading papers we would not have had to read otherwise. In addition, we needed another two and a half hours to sort out the papers, assign the average grade and, in rare cases (only four during the semester), discuss widely differing grades. So a total of only four extra hours for each graded set of papers is all that the system absolutely requires. Commenting on papers may even be more efficient when the grade is already assigned, but we tended to spend the same amount of time per paper in commenting, whatever the grading system.

An additional procedural problem troubled us at the beginning of the semester. We were worried that the procedure itself would become a focus for the students' attention, further adding to the normal quota of distractions in a composition class. But this proved less troublesome than we had anticipated. After the first paper had been graded and returned, the students simply stopped worrying about the grading system. When it became clear that such a system could work once, they simply

didn't concern themselves about its mechanics on successive papers.

The students generally seemed to adapt well to the new experience, and their end-of-the-semester evaluations of the grading bore this out. Of the fifty students, thirty expressed positive feelings about the grading. Representative comments ranged from the laconic, "It gives you the feeling you are not being shafted," to the more expansive, "I think it's a good idea because now I'm sure that my papers are graded on my ability and not because of my personality. I think this is a very fair method and you should continue with it!" Only a few of the students mentioned the increased freedom that we saw as one of the system's strongest points, and even these few were more impressed by the system's fairness than the freedom offered. It seems that students have been conditioned for so long to accept as inevitable the inequities of grading that any step in the other direction monopolizes their attention. Besides, freedom is not a concept that most students have learned to associate with formal schooling.

Eleven students were indifferent to the system and tended not to write much, while nine expressed negative feelings. Of the reasons cited for the negative responses, the recurrent one was "confusion" because there was more than one person to please, coupled with a feeling that it is more difficult to satisfy two readers than one. Although these complaints could reflect a legitimate concern for identifying an audience for a piece of writing, it seems more likely that these students

were unwilling to let go of the idea that pleasing a teacher is the object of writing a paper. However, the majority of the students, once they had given up the impulse to please, seemed to enjoy the latitude this system allows.

As teachers we found the system irritating in ways that were probably productive. No longer could we make our prescriptive advice to students part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In previous classes we had been able to give the students particular advice about how to improve their rough drafts--perhaps to be more concrete in a particular section--and then were able to reward them with a higher grade if they took our advice. It did not necessarily matter if the students' execution actually improved the paper; we could reward them simply for trying to comply with our advice. Under the new system, we had to make sure that our advice would actually improve the paper and then had to deal with any problems the students had in acting on our advice. The ghost of another reader kept our reaction to the papers honest. On the other hand, sometimes students found it discouraging when they did what they thought we wanted and then didn't receive a better grade because they had some trouble acting on our advice.

At first we were not entirely sure that this disappointment was a good thing for students. Would they be better served if we were to be honest and perhaps discouraging or dishonest and supportive in our grades. Under our new system we had no choice but the former. Our system had been designed to

provide as fair and honest a grade as possible. And we now believe that the benefits of this honesty more than compensate for any possible setbacks that discouraging comments might cause. Our feelings grew out of thinking about the questionable morality system grades enforce. It is almost a cliché to accuse schools of educating students to be compliant, obedient, and conforming--well-tooled cogs for society's wheels. But that does not make it any the less true, and the standard system of grading tends to make such education into unconsciousness acceptable. We finally decided that if we expected our system to elicit trust and honesty from our students, we could ask no less from ourselves. We couldn't give them unearned rewards, however good our intentions. And so we kept the separation of judging and advising intact and sought in our comments to offer students the freedom of their own initiative, along with our advice about their writing. But both they and we knew that the responsibility for improving was primarily theirs, and no rewards would be doled out for mere slavish conformity.

We have also found that our system provides another benefit; it helps relieve the anxiety that comes from being the sole judge of what makes a piece of writing work. Passing judgment, even for the best of motives, involves imposing a system of values and standards upon someone else. If the values we impose are those rewarded and respected by the culture at large, we can to some measure argue that what we do is for the students' own good. But in spite of this

rationalization, making such judgments is often a lonely task. The effectiveness of any written discourse depends upon how well it communicates its author's meaning to a reader; and some form of communication is what writing that is not simply therapy comes down to. But we often feel we are reacting to writing as individuals full of idiosyncratic prejudices. The isolation typical of the composition teacher's role as evaluator creates a tension between our feelings as humanists, who should be tolerant of other ways of perceiving and writing about the world, and our role as judges who must evaluate the effectiveness of a communication. The tension is not made any easier to bear by our realization that our understanding of communication is forcefully molded by our knowledge of previous writing and traditions, a knowledge very much shaped by class and education. This experiment helped alleviate this isolation and the resulting tension by bringing in the judgment of another person. And while a second reader allowed for a wider, and so more tolerant, audience, his presence also provided firmer, less equivocal standards. Since this person was not too different from ourselves, there was some assurance that the two of us formed a closer approximation to society's standards for writing than one person grading alone. We could maintain our feeling, perhaps illusion, of tolerance and still say that a certain piece of writing did or did not communicate another way of perceiving the world. Thus our final judgment, our grade, which provides our major way of reinforcing our sense of

what works well in writing, is made to seem more universal, less idiosyncratic. The correlation between our grades was always reassuring; there really is some consensus in evaluating writing.

But the surest proof of our faith in such a radical departure from traditional procedures is to ask ourselves not whether we would recommend the method to other teachers, but whether we would choose to do it again. Would we do it again? Because we feel that this system can provide an opportunity for students to benefit from the intrinsic motivation of exploring their own thoughts and at the same time does not relinquish the extrinsic motivation of grades for those who need them, our answer must be yes. The starting point of the writing process is an experience of unease and tension. This may be artificially induced by the simple threat of a failing grade, but more healthy and productive is the writer's feeling of a dissonance which can be resolved only through some kind of expression. Intrinsic motivation for writing is, of course, the ideal, and in composition courses it is all too rare. But never have we encountered a student who felt the need to resolve some discrepancy between the way the world appears to others and his own perceptions, who did not contrive to write a successful paper. Perhaps not all that elegant or sophisticated, but a successful piece of writing nonetheless. We feel it is the task of graders to do as much as possible to allow this intrinsic motivation to emerge. By reducing the distorting pressures of grades on both teachers and students, our

anonymous grading system moves, we believe, toward that goal.

Note

[1] For a system very similar in form and secondary purpose, but with a strikingly different primary purpose, see James E. Ford and Gregory Larkin, "The Portfolio System: An End to Backsliding Writing Standards, "College English, 39 (1978), 950-955.